

BILBO'S DE ZINE



CANNY COMPACTS

Two stylish urban-friendly campers are designed to be distinctly different



The times they are a changin' - one of Bob Dylan's anthemic protest songs entered unbidden into my consciousness as I considered the raison d'être of this month's dynamic duo: relevant though, as for some time I've sensed a warp-factor shift in purchasers' shortlists, away from ever-longer tag-axle European coachbuilts and back towards compact campervans.

motorcaravanners are looking to sell their large motorhome and second car and replace it with one economical vehicle, which will fulfil both roles. Regular readers may already be aware that I am of the opinion that the only true MPV (multi-purpose vehicle) is a compact motorcaravan and not a glorified estate car, or worse still, a 'bread van' with windows and extra seats - the like of which, manufacturers' PR departments are currently claiming, deserve the moniker MPV.



Words and pictures by Jonathan Lloyd

Escalating running costs, ever-tighter emission controls and overcrowded roads have been the catalyst for a similar downsizing effect on new cars sold in Blighty. It has become apparent from speaking to readers at outdoor shows and club rallies that many experienced

Both Fiat and Mercedes-Benz were robust in stating that our combatants this month were not based on any sort of commercial van, but on vehicles designed from the outset to be people carriers, with a panel van derivative available. Some may feel the difference to be academic: so did I, that is, until these two were

LAYOUT PLAN

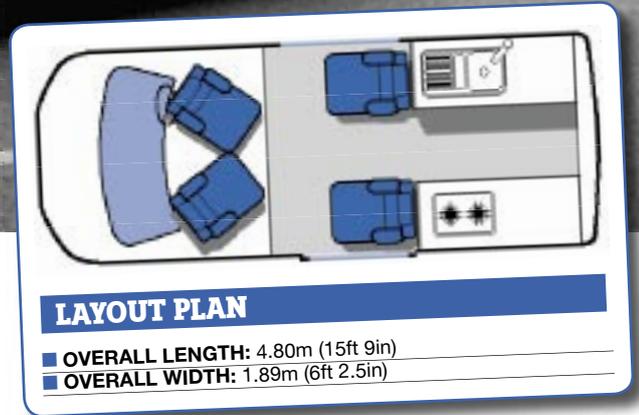
- OVERALL LENGTH: 4.99m (16ft 4.5in)
- OVERALL WIDTH: 1.90m (6ft 3in)



1 Mercedes driving environment: speaking purely personally, I don't like the foot-operated parking brake

2 The last generation of Fiat's Scudo was good, the current one is even better

WHEELHOME PANACHE



put through their paces. Unlike their closest rivals (motorcaravans based on elevating-roof Volkswagen T5s which don't drive like a car, but like a very civilised van), the Panache and De Zine do really get breathtakingly close to driving like a car - or at least to driving like a people carrier. I reckon it's all down to the height of the seat squabs, angle of the steering wheel and the vehicle's suspension.

Strangely, The blue Mercedes Viano-based De Zine's colour is actually called Lugano Grey - the silver Fiat Scudo-based Panache is labelled Aluminium Grey. Is it me?

Anyway, they both look sleek enough, mainly because they are. To my philistine eyes they actually look very similar, with just the height of the headlamps to distinguish them. Access and

egress is good, especially via the twin side sliding doors, and these come into their own in crowded car parks where space is tight. Forward, and over-the-shoulder views were panoramic in both, though the extra wide-angle rear view mirror above the Panache's normal one disseminated even more information than government 'spooks' have left on trains.

Both De Zine and Panache are designed to appeal to both experienced motorcaravanners and to those considering buying a 'van for the very first time, perhaps using it initially to support hobbies, activities and interests. With the latter group in mind, there follows a short introduction to the companies involved...

De Zine provider Bilbo's has been trading

since 1972 when, those of us with long memories will recall, it had a base in Holland and exported ex Dutch army Vee-dub vans to the UK. These could be bought bare or with a Bilbo's camper conversion installed. Under the professional and caring stewardship of owners David and Moira Latham, the company has grown to become one of our leading independent converters of the Volkswagen.

Respected German motorcaravan converter Westfalia is now back in private equity ownership - after being owned by Volkswagen until recently. The name is synonymous with quality manufacturing and owning a 'Westie' is something that generations of European explorers and travellers have aspired to. The De Zine is produced by Westfalia, but specially modified for the UK market: Bilbo's is the sole agent.

Wheelhome builds the Panache at its small, but efficient, facility in the Essex village of Hook End. Here, proprietor Stephen Wheeler, together with brother Ian, carries on the 23-year family tradition of squeezing a motorcaravan quart into a small-vehicle pint pot. Wheelhome produces fully equipped motorcaravans (and trailer caravans) that can be garaged and will be able to slide into most car parks with height barriers. All of the cabinetwork is built in-house and Wheelhome conversions have SVA (Single Vehicle Approval).

ON THE ROAD

De Zine's rear-wheel drive, five-speed torque converter-driven automatic gearbox and 204





BILBO'S DE ZINE

I LIKED

- Awesome engine and silky-smooth transmission
- Fully integrated anglicised conversion
- Option of additional crash tested rear seat(s) with three-point restraints
- Built to up a quality, not down to a price

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Fire extinguisher and fire blanket

I DISLIKED

- Foot-operated parking brake
- Restricted rearwards through vision



3 Classic layout of cabinets down one side; both cab seats swivel

4 Rear bench seat is equipped with individual, electrically-operated backrests

5 Comfortable relaxing and elbows-in dining for four

horses added up to indecently quick, Gatso-triggering, progress. At the other extreme, it provided the most relaxed pootle I've had for years! Unhurried, indolent and barely audible, this V6/slush-box power train is so competent that it brought a very broad smile back to this old cynic's boat race.

There were some less than welcome quirks though: notably, Westfalia has managed to reduce further the (already restricted by the rear seat headrests) rearward vision by placing a transverse locker that effectively blocks a top hundred millimetres-plus of tailgate window.

Further, the uncluttered cab floor is to be applauded, but why didn't Merc just put a hand-operated parking brake on the door side of the driver's seat like Fiat has. Instead, some muppet has decided that a foot-operated/hand-released effort - such as that fitted to many American vehicles - is okay. Two disadvantages were found: firstly, on release it sounds like a jack hammer and secondly one needs an operational left leg and foot which (possibly mobility restricted) purchasers of automatic transmission versions may not have.

Panache's 2.0-litres and 120 nags sounded paltry in comparison to the De Zine's 204. Not fair, of course: it might only have almost half the power, but it's certainly better than half as good. More than enough get up and go for most folks, plus a paltry thirst are in its favour. Now add in the supremely smooth ride over all surfaces, achieved by the self-levelling air suspension at the rear and it's no longer a one horse race.

The fit and finish on the Panache Fiat Scudo's coachwork - especially concerning the uniformity of gaps between the panels - was mighty good. These gaps are called shut lines and they are one of the hardest things to control in the assembly process. Despite claims to the contrary, it would have been hard for the De Zine's Merc to have been any better than the Fiat in this regard. Subjectively, I gained the impression that some of the body panels might have been slightly thicker on the Mercedes, or at least had been fitted with more effective acoustic damping on the inside. I'm not questioning whether Fiat is able to match Merc's build quality, the important ask is whether it can consistently do it?

Fiat has blotted its copybook by allowing some distracting reflections on the windscreen and also by not allowing something... The well-received Comfort-Matic auto transmission is available on the Ducato and will be on the new Fiorino, but is not an option on the Scudo. Doh!

For me, personally, the three-pointed star wins the day here, not because of the pass-

I LIKED

- Smooth tractable engine
- Uncluttered central aisle and unobstructed side doors
- Faultless ride
- A different approach, featuring very clever fabrication

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Option of Comfort-Matic auto gearbox
- Waste water tank (even a tiny one)

I DISLIKED

- Annoying reflections in windscreen
- Sink cover awkward to remove

storming motor (30-50 mph in an amazing 4.6 seconds), but because of the availability of automatic transmission.

LOUNGE AND DINE

Before assessing these vehicles as motorcaravans, they had to be converted from transport to residential mode. Both elevating roofs feature hinged GRP lids with canvas sides equipped with glazed panels and zipped covers. De Zine is hinged at the rear end, while Panache is front hinged. Raising and lowering is assisted by sprung dampers (struts), though out of the two, I'd put the Wheelhome slightly ahead, mostly because the stiff over-centre catches on the De Zine made my rheumatic hands and wrists ache. Of paramount importance to purchasers has been Wheelhome's Knife-Edge roof, which has the advantage of adding no more than a hair's breadth to the Fiat's height of 1.89m (6ft 2.5in) compared to the Merc's 1.97m (6ft 5.5in). The latter should go into most multi-storey car parks, but may not go into as many domestic garages as the Fiat will. For those requiring an objective measure of a hair's breadth, I have it on good authority from the 'consulting engineer' in the saloon bar of the Dog and Rat that it's bigger than a 'smidge' but small than a 'shade.'

Three lounge layouts between two 'vans. Both have one, but one has two: all clear? No? I'll have go at explaining then. Traditionally, the main salon in most campers consists of two swivelled cab seats facing the rear seating: both interiors can be set up in this way.

In the De Zine the dining table attaches to the fridge cabinet, while there are two individual island-leg tables in the Panache. The crash-tested split bench seat in the De Zine can be pushed back on its tracking to allow the cook a bit more manoeuvring space. Not quite settled your feathers? The bonus is that electrically-operated adjustment for the back rake and squab can be set differently for the optimum comfort of the occupants of each half of the pew.

I felt more at one with nature in the Panache, as each of the side sliding doors can be opened to allow the outside inside. Actually, both sliders can be opened in the De Zine as well, though the fridge cabinet blocks nearside access... More on that later.

Arranged like this, these lounge/dining areas are socially inclusive for four and offer feet-up relaxing for two. However, the Panache has a trump card up its sleeve. An alternative lounge arrangement is not just possible, but recommended by the designers and much appreciated, it seems, by owners.

WHEELHOME PANACHE

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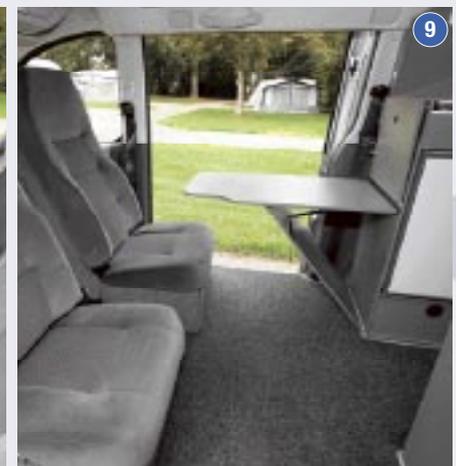
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6 The conversion's front end is home to individual seating

7 Panache's galley is located aft

8 Lounge and dine option one sees facing seats

9 Option two - the rear seats swivel to face the rear kitchen

On Test Bilbo's De Zine & Wheelhome Panache



Firstly, the front (cab) seats have to face the front and be moved as far forwards as possible. Next, the rear seats are swivelled to face rearwards and hey presto, a really good lounge is the result. Of course, it will only seat two, but as the Panache is only a two berth, this probably won't be a problem. However, just saying that the rear seats 'swivel' isn't really telling the whole story...

Most swivelling seats have the pivot on top of the seat box. On the Panache, the whole kit and caboodle swivels, including a circular turntable for each seat, which has been cut out of the floor. You have to look closely though, to see how this pleasing piece of engineering operates. The rear seats are not standard Fiat items, but made to Wheelhome's specification by a specialist passenger seat manufacturer.

Both conversions use the base vehicle manufacturers' mounting points for a pair of rear forward-facing seatbelts.

Once again it's not all cut and dried though, as just as the Panache looked to be out in front, the De Zine catches up. Here's how: the seat tracking recessed into the floor of the De Zine has been designed and constructed to accept an additional crash-tested single rear passenger seat with three-point belt, or to accept a wheelchair which can then be safely secured together with a three or multi-point restraint. For those with brittle bones and other painful conditions, the additional seat can be safely located so that it faces rearwards if this is more comfortable for the occupant, or if a carer's close observation is necessary. Fantastic.

COOK'S QUARTERS

De Zine opts for the traditional Vee-dub layout of a run of base kitchen cupboards along the UK nearside. Panache's galley is at the far rear, divided either side of a central aisle.

Both feature a two-burner hob (the Panache has push-button ignition, the De Zine needs matches). Both are equipped as standard with a 12V compressor-type fridge -

10 De Zine's galley has a two-burner hob and a top-loading 12V compressor-driven fridge

11 Twin sliding doors and removable fridge cabinet also give easy access to UK kerbside

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

BILBO'S DE ZINE

PRICE

- From: £37,950 OTR
- As tested: £44,640 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturers' figures)

- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: 3 years base vehicle and conversion
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: Steel five-door body with GRP top/canvas-sided rising roof
- Length: 4.99m (16ft 4.5in)*
- Width: 1.90m (6ft 3in)*
- Height: 1.96m (6ft 5in)* (roof lowered)
- Wheelbase: 3.20m (10ft 6in)*
- Rear overhang: 1.01m (3ft 3.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 2940kg
- Payload: 635kg-930kg (depending on specification)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Mercedes-Benz Viano motorcaravan specification window van
- Engine: 3.0-litre V6 turbo-diesel producing 204bhp
- Transmission: Five-speed automatic gearbox, rear-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round, foot-operated/hand-release parking brake
- Suspension: Front: Independent on McPherson struts. Rear: Independent with coil springs on trailing arms
- Features: Remote central locking, electric mirrors and windows, driver, passenger and curtain airbags, cab air-conditioning, trip computer, ESP (Electronic Stability Programme) with ABS, ASR, EBV and BAS, privacy glass, heated rear window, rear wash/wipe

INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of rear bench/bed, nearside wardrobe and kitchen. Additional foldaway double bed in elevating roof
- Insulation: Closed cell polystyrene foam in body cavities
- Interior height: Roof raised: 2.20m (7ft 2.5in) max

KITCHEN

- Sink: Stainless steel unit with pumped hot and cold water supply



- Cooker: Smev two-burner hob, manual ignition
- Fridge: Electrolux 12V top-loading compressor type. Capacity 40 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: None fitted
- Basin: None fitted
- Shower: None fitted

BEDS

Downstairs double

- Length: 2.00m (6ft 7in)
- Width: 1.09m (3ft 7in)

Roof double

- Length: 1.87m (6ft 2in)
- Width: 990mm (3ft 3in)
- Headroom: 1.00m reducing to 300mm (3ft 3.5in - 1ft 0in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: 40 litres (8.8 gallons)
- Waste water: 27 litres (6.0 gallons)
- Water heater: Diesel-fired with timer
- Space heater: Diesel-fired blown-air with timer
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: 1x 2.72kg Campingaz 907 cylinder
- Lighting: 12V: Three Mercedes luminaires, swivel reading lights over tailgate, stalk light for upper bed
- Sockets: 230V: Four. 12V: Three

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Upgrade to 204bhp engine with automatic transmission (£4000), alloy wheels (£530), electric folding mirrors (£230), metallic paint (£585), steering wheel multi-function control (£325), reversing sensors (£495), privacy glass (£275)
- Conversion: Grill (£250)

Other options

- Base: Interactive satellite navigation (£POA)
- Conversion: Additional single rear seat (£525)

E&OE



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HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

WHEELHOME PANACHE

PRICE

- **From:** £32,683 OTR
- **As tested:** £33,165 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturers' figures)

- **Berths:** 2
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle, 1 year conversion
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No
- **Construction:** Steel five-door body with GRP top/canvas sided elevating-roof
- **Length:** 4.80m (15ft 9in)*
- **Width:** 1.89m (6ft 2.5in)*
- **Height:** 1.90 (6ft 3in)* (roof lowered)
- **Wheelbase:** 3.00m (9ft 10in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 830mm (2ft 8.5in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 2902kg
- **Payload:** 499kg

THE VEHICLE

- **Chassis:** Fiat Scudo Panorama short wheelbase window van
- **Engine:** 2.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 120bhp
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all-round, hand-operated parking brake
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent on McPherson struts. Rear: Adjustable-height automatic-levelling pneumatic system
- **Features:** Remote central locking, electric windows, electric (heated) mirrors with auto fold back, driver passenger and curtain airbags, cab air-conditioning, radio/CD player, auxiliary driving lights, auto lights and wipers, fire extinguisher, ABS with EBA and ASR, privacy glass, heated rear window, rear wash-wipe.

INSIDE

- **Layout:** Choice of lounge layouts: either swivelled cab seats with island leg tables or rear seats swivelled to face rearwards with tables attached to forward ends of kitchen cabinets. Rear kitchen and wardrobe
- **Insulation:** Walls covered in insulating fabric
- **Interior height:** 2.29m (7ft 6in)

KITCHEN

- **Sink:** Stainless steel unit with drainer and monobloc mixer tap



- **Cooker:** Smev two-burner hob with push-button ignition
- **Fridge:** Waeco 12V compressor type. Capacity 50 litres

WASHROOM

- **Toilet:** Dedicated cupboard for (optional) Porta Potti 335
- **Basin:** None fitted
- **Shower:** None fitted

BEDS

- **lounge singles**
- **Lengths:** 1.88m (6ft 2in)
- **Widths:** 572mm (1ft 10.5in)

EQUIPMENT

- **Fresh water:** 36 litres (8.0 gallons)
- **Waste water:** No tank fitted
- **Water heater:** Elgena 12/230V boiler
- **Space heater:** None fitted
- **Leisure battery:** 110 amp hr
- **Gas:** 1 x 2.72kg Campingaz 907 and 1 x 0.45kg Campingaz 901 cylinder
- **Lighting:** 12V: Three twin-tube fluorescents and reading lights
- **Sockets:** 230V: Three. 12V: Two

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** None
- **Conversion:** Elgena 12/230V water heater (£410), Porta Potti 335 toilet (£72)

Other options

- **Base:** 136 bhp engine upgrade (£881), towbar (£485)
- **Conversion:** Double bed infill cushions (£180), Privacy curtain (£60), raised platform for toilet (£45), Webasto diesel-fired blown-air space heater (£1050)

a conventional side-hinged door version in the Panache, a top loader in the De Zine.

What is undeniably clever (and a result of Bilbo's input) is that the fridge cabinet is easily removable so that the little 'dahlings' can be let out safely on to the pavement (though the nearside sliding door) when on the school run. Further, it could be placed in an awning when on site.

We used to have problems, or criticisms, now they are all issues that have to be prioritised. God bless America! Anyway, in reverse order of importance my issues are that I thought that the good-looking granite worktop in the Panache had the disadvantage of making the sink top/occasional table heavier and more unwieldy than it needs to be. Next, the combined sink and hob lid in the De Zine made the interior a bit gloomy, as when raised it blocked the adjacent window.

What impressed me hugely though, was the quality of the Westfalia cabinetwork. De Zine is beautifully executed, in a way that only a big company with state-of-the-art computer-controlled cutting and moulding equipment can manage. But, and it's a big but, when considering the amount and variety of available kitchen storage, the Panache was the clear winner.

BATHING SPACE

No washroom is present in these compact 'vans, so ablutions will be at the kitchen sink in both – or, much more likely, at the site's facilities. However, although I don't mind being a bit grubby, when I've gotta go, I've gotta go, so it's the lavatorial provision which was of greater interest. Both have an extra-cost option of a Porta Potti, which I guess will only be used in emergencies. Panache won the day here with a 'royal flush' as a dedicated storage cupboard was provided, allowing easy retrieval of the freestanding loo at anytime. In comparison, the provision for the De Zine looked like a bit of an afterthought. One has to remember to retrieve it from beneath the rear bed extension and place it close to the front seats before retiring for the night.

BED TIME

12 Panache kitchen is divided either side of the aisle. Granite worktops really are made from granite

13 Optional Porta Potti toilet has dedicated stowage and can be easily accessed day or night

E&OE



BILBO'S DE ZINE



14 Split rear seat reclines electrically to form a double or single bed

15 Tambour doors to rear cupboards offer easy access in a confined space. Optional toilet stores below

16 There's drawer-based storage under the rear seat

17 Dash-mounted control panel is an example of just how well the conversion integrates with the base vehicle



'Downstairs,' both motorcaravans offer a longitudinal double bed.

In the De Zine, the solo camper can convert just half the full width, providing a single bed and leaving a bit of lounge and a changing area. Only in the Panache, can two single beds (with a central aisle) be made.

However, only the De Zine has an additional/alternative high-level double bed. Located in the roof and hinging down, this looked to be perfectly capable of supporting two adults, providing neither is of too generous a frame.

In both campervans it's perfectly possible to make the early morning hot drink (and access the fridge) with the downstairs double bed in situ. Enthusiastic knob twiddlers and button pushers will actually enjoy converting the De Zine's rear seat into a bed (and back to seating) as it's all electrically operated. Tee hee!

STORE ROOM

The trick to successful motorcaravan downsizing - and to survive without coming to blows - in what is literally a camping-car, is to ditch all the cumbersome accessories, buying new lightweight and folding ones to fit the available space. Panache has the most cupboards and cubbyholes, but De Zine has more space for bigger items - notably under the rear seat and rear bed extension. Both have a wardrobe of sorts: De Zine's is a cupboard with a tambour door, plus another rotating one in the far rear offside corner. The Panache has a sealed space to hang a few shirts, blouses and a couple of pairs of trousers etc. This is located behind the hob and is more useful than it appears.

It never ceases to amaze me how many motorcaravan manufacturers (who should to know better) fail to provide safe storage for tables. Full marks to both manufacturers here. De Zine's is on the inside of a side door and was so well camouflaged, it took me a while to find it. The two larger Wheelhome tables have their own dedicated cupboard at the far rear, while the smaller one doubles as the hinged sink cover. I love dual-purpose kit, the smaller the motorcaravan, the more such items are appreciated.

LIFE SUPPORT

Both have a similar size fresh water tanks, but only the De Zine has a fixed wastewater tank. Wheelhome supplies a folding bucket in lieu. Simple to operate and not much to go wrong, but that said, I would have preferred a waste tank (even if it was only a tiny one), so nothing needs to be outside the 'van when making a crafty cuppa in a car park.

Not so many years ago, hardly anybody would have expected to find a 230V hook-up in a campervan, but now they are commonplace. Both these 'vans have same, a good-sized leisure battery and both were equipped with a water heater. The Panache was fitted with an extra-cost Elgena 12V/230V unit, while the De Zine has a diesel-fired combined water and blown-air space heater. The control for this is integrated into the management panel and mounted on the dashboard in such a way as to make it look like an original Mercedes fitting.

As presented for evaluation, the Panache is a summer-only camper and the De Zine would be classified as suitable for use then and also in what folk now call the shoulder seasons (late

spring and early autumn). However, add the optional Webasto diesel-fired space heater and the Panache's camping season will be similarly extended. Don't want to shell out the extra £1050 required? Pop down to your local electrical retailer or DIY shop, invest between £10 and £20 on a thermostatically controlled 230V fan heater, and only stay on sites with hook-up when the weather turns chilly. There are other ways to keep warm, but as I'm writing this before the watershed I couldn't possibly mention them.

CONCLUSION

Both of these fabulous vehicles are sold by folk who are not only enthusiastic motorcaravanners, but who have been away for meaningful periods in these particular models, tweaking the design as a result. If only all motorcaravans were developed (and sold) in this way...

Which to choose? Really, these are so different that fans of one are unlikely to consider the other. If you want the performance of a pocket rocket (and the best auto gearbox I've tested for years), it's the Mercedes Viano-based De Zine. However, the more sharply-priced Fiat Scudo-based Panache was a much closer runner-up on the road than you might think and should be more economical, especially when urban jousting.

Conversion-wise, it will depend on whether the option of two separate single beds is important. In a nutshell, the Panache's amidships area is much less cluttered than the De Zine's, while the quirky alternative lounge layout gave it quite a spacious feel, but only accommodated two. Of course, if you're motorcaravanning/sleeping compliment is more than two, then the De Zine is more suitable.

Firstly, what is worth reiterating is that the level of integration of the De Zine's cabinet work with the Mercedes interior is seamless: it was difficult to know where Merc began and Westfalia ended. Secondly, the Panache's layout is a grand example of (clever) lateral thinking being used to create a different type of campervan.

It is dangerous to make predictions about anything when one doesn't already know the outcome, but that said, I predict that these two will both be strong sellers. Of course, they already are!

WHEELHOME PANACHE



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18 Seats flatten to make two single beds, while a double is optional

19 Forward storage over windscreen looked useful

20 Gas locker has room for a single Campingaz 907 and smaller spare cylinder



VEHICLES LOANED FOR

EVALUATION BY:

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